

How Can These Things Be?
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Introduction to the Morning Lesson

Today's text from John's Gospel contains the most familiar verse in all of the Bible, John 3.16. Yet this verse happens in the midst of a story that is complex, at points bizarre, and frequently controversial. In this story we meet a man named Nicodemus, identified as a Pharisee and leader of the Jews. That means he was one of the Sanhedrin, a body of 70 men who exercised for the Jews executive, legislative, judicial, and religious authority. He was a mighty important man, but he came alone one night to talk with Jesus.

When John tells us it was night, he is less concerned about the time of day than about Nicodemus' true condition. Remember that in chapter 1, John described Jesus as the light of the world, the light which shines in the darkness, and which the darkness has not overcome. But Nicodemus is still in the dark, which is strange, if you think about it. By day, Nicodemus is everything you could want to be; by night, he sneaks a visit to Jesus because something isn't right in his life. By day, Nicodemus is in control of things, in control of his own life, his own "kingdom," if you will. By night, he comes to ask Jesus about the kingdom of God. Jesus says that entering the kingdom of God requires a special birth.

That literally blows Nicodemus away. I say *literally* because in the text there is a play on words. The same Greek word (πνευμα) can be translated either as *wind* or *spirit*. It can mean the wind that blows or the Spirit of God or our spirit. Jesus uses this word-play metaphorically: the mystery of God's Spirit is the mystery of the wind. It blows where it will but we cannot see it. That confounds old Nicodemus and he's just blown away by the wind/Spirit. He's not mentioned again in chapter three and we don't see him anymore until after Jesus is crucified at the end of the gospel.

When Jesus describes the special birth, he uses another word with a double meaning: it can either mean *born from above* or *born again*. Jesus meant we must be born from above. Nicodemus misunderstood; he thought we must literally be born again. As is typical in John's Gospel, a misunderstanding leads to Jesus's teaching. Let's read this amazing story in John 3.

John 3.1-17 (NRSV)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

The mysterious power of God

Although the text says that Jesus answered Nicodemus, up to that point the Pharisee had not asked a question. But Jesus knew what he wanted. Nicodemus wanted to know about the kingdom of God. How do we get into it? Jesus said entering the kingdom of God means being born in a special way. That confused Nicodemus and then he asked *the* question: “How can these things be?”

It is interesting that some Christians, largely influenced by the old King James Version, have essentially adopted Nicodemus’ misunderstanding as *the* descriptive term for being a Christian. Jesus used an ambiguous word to say we must be born from above. Nicodemus wondered how we could reenter our mothers’ wombs and be born again. But Jesus was not saying that; he was saying we need to be born from above or born from God. In a certain sense this is not being born again but being truly born for the first time. Birth as a human being is a two-part process in John: water and Spirit, flesh and God. Without the Holy Spirit, it is not that we are not born again; rather it is that without the Holy Spirit, we are just plain not born. To be fully human means both physical and spiritual birth.

Now I don’t want to offend any who favor the terminology of “born again.” I am a *born again* Christian. I have been a born again Christian since I was six-years old and my older sister helped me pray and ask Jesus Christ to come into my life. I know what born again means and I accept it even though what Jesus was teaching is better understood as being born from above.

But what happens when a six-year old child asks Jesus into his life? Was there something special about me? Did I have a stronger faith, for example, than other six-year-olds? No. Was I a truly good boy who somehow deserved the Spirit to blow in my life? No. Was I blessed because I had a praying mother and a church community that emphasized faith commitment? Yes. But it is no one’s fault if they don’t have those. The point is that what happened to me wasn’t about me. It was about the grace of God, the wind of the Spirit blowing where it willed. Why blow in me and not somewhere else? I don’t know! How can these things be? We are left with the mysterious power of God.

That’s the point of that strange verse about Moses and the serpent. Jesus said, “The Son of Man” — a reference to himself — “must be lifted up” — a reference to his dying on the cross — just like “Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness.” What does that mean? Go back and read from the Old Testament book of Numbers, chapter 21. The Hebrew people were wandering in the wilderness for forty years on their way to the Promised Land. One day they started to complain against God and Moses. “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no water and what food there is tastes lousy!”

So then Numbers tells us that the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people. The snakes bit the people, many of whom died. Then the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents.” So Moses prayed and God said to him, “‘Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.’ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it upon a pole. Whenever a snake bit someone, that person would look at the bronze snake and live.” (See Numbers 21.4-9)

Now that is a strange text. It seems to describe a kind of magic the likes of which are hardly associated with Jewish or Christian faith. But here’s how that text works, at least in John. The bronze serpent was a symbol of the Israelites’ sin. They were disobedient to God so they were plagued with snakes. But a symbol of that sin was lifted up and when they looked on it, they would live. So the cross is a symbol of our sin. The cross is how humankind crucified Jesus Christ, the light of the world. But when we look to the cross lifted up, we will live.

How can these things be? Does this work by power in us or by goodness in us? No! It is the mysterious power of God. Whatever the bronze serpent meant long ago, it means at least this for us: God was powerful to save his people when they couldn’t save themselves. And the cross means that God is powerful to save us because we cannot save ourselves. This is the radical grace of being born from above. It is not something we do. It is the mysterious power of God; it is the Spirit blowing where the Spirit wills and when it happens to us we can’t help but rejoice in amazement. How can these things be? Only by the mysterious power of God.

These are wonderful things. But the mysterious power of God has also a side that is less comforting to us. For if the power of God alone saves us, if being born from above is God’s work and not our work, then why me, why us, and why not others? Why does the Spirit blow into some lives and not, it would seem, into others?

These are painful questions for many of us. I remember crying as a boy because my father would not go to church. The things of God were becoming more and more important to me and he would not share in that, at least not in any visible way. For many of you this question is most poignant when you think of your own family: when you think about your children or parents, your own brothers or sisters, your own husband or wife. We rejoice that the Spirit has come to us. Why does the Spirit not blow in our children’s lives or in our spouses’ lives? I don’t think there is any greater anguish for a Christian than this very question. Why me and why not the ones whom I love?

Well, there are those who say God saves everyone. It doesn’t matter what you believe. There are even some hints in the Bible that suggest this. But you cannot read the *whole Bible* and come away with that as your *only* conclusion. The Bible also says in many ways that God cares very much about what we believe.

There are others, including John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, who say that people keep themselves from God. In fact, the lectionary listing of our text didn’t include the verse that Calvin and others would use in support of this position. For just after saying in verse 17, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” we have verse 18: “Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” In other words, verse 18 seems to say that the Spirit does *not* blow where people do not

believe. So we ask with great passion and sometimes pain, how can these things be?

Conclusion

The only answer to give, the only answer faithful to Jesus Christ and to the Bible is this: God so loved the world.

- *GOD* so loved the world.
- God *SO* loved the world.
- God so *LOVED* the world.
- God so loved *THE WORLD*.

And because God so loved the world we do not and cannot know how the human story ends except that it ends as it began in the eternal love of God. I think John wants us to understand this by bringing Nicodemus back at the end of the Gospel. After the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, Nicodemus, who began in the dark, steps into the light. In chapter 3, Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark and fades back into the dark. But in chapter 19, after Jesus is glorified on the cross, Nicodemus comes fully into the light.

I think John tell us this in order to show that God never gives up on anyone. I believe there is no one on whom God gives up, not in time and not in eternity. I believe that with all my heart. Never give up on anyone, my friend! Never give up on yourself! Because God gives up on no one.

How can these things be?

God so loved the world.